



Early Grade Disenrollment in Atlanta Public Schools: Seeking Solutions Informed by Families of Young Children

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Introduction :

This case study analyzes the causes and potential solutions regarding early grade disenrollment in Atlanta Public Schools (APS). Following the COVID pandemic, large urban school districts, including Atlanta, are facing a decline in early grade student enrollment as well as increased disenrollment (“disenrollment”), particularly among children and families of color and those living in poverty. Research has consistently found that low socio-economic status is associated with higher rates of school disengagement and disenrollment. This relationship has only become more acute following the pandemic. As such, disenrollment, along with the broader trend of increasing chronic absenteeism, is emerging as an even greater challenge to equity and outcomes as urban communities and local school districts move beyond the COVID pandemic and return to full-time, in-person schooling.

Our focus for this case study, conducted in partnership with the Atlanta Public Schools, was driven by previous work that focused on strengthening transitions into and across the early grades of public schools as a critical strategy to improve outcomes for young children. In 2022, EducationCounsel worked directly with APS and other Atlanta community support organizations to implement solutions offered in the [Toolkit for Using Policy to Enable Effective and Supportive Transitions for Children Families Educators](#), a resource created in collaboration with our [colleagues at New America](#). Produced at the height of the pandemic, the Toolkit sought to provide policy ideas to help leaders take action on improving transitions and aligning children’s early learning experiences.

During the rollout of our transition support, APS recognized declining enrollment patterns for young children remained, particularly for education clusters serving low-income children of color. Across the early grades, children were not returning in the numbers expected following the reopening of schools. This resulted in the loss of school and classroom funding, and staff positions, as well as the relocation of pre-k programs. More importantly, however, was the potential negative impact to a cohort of children and families not availing themselves of the benefits associated with early school participation.

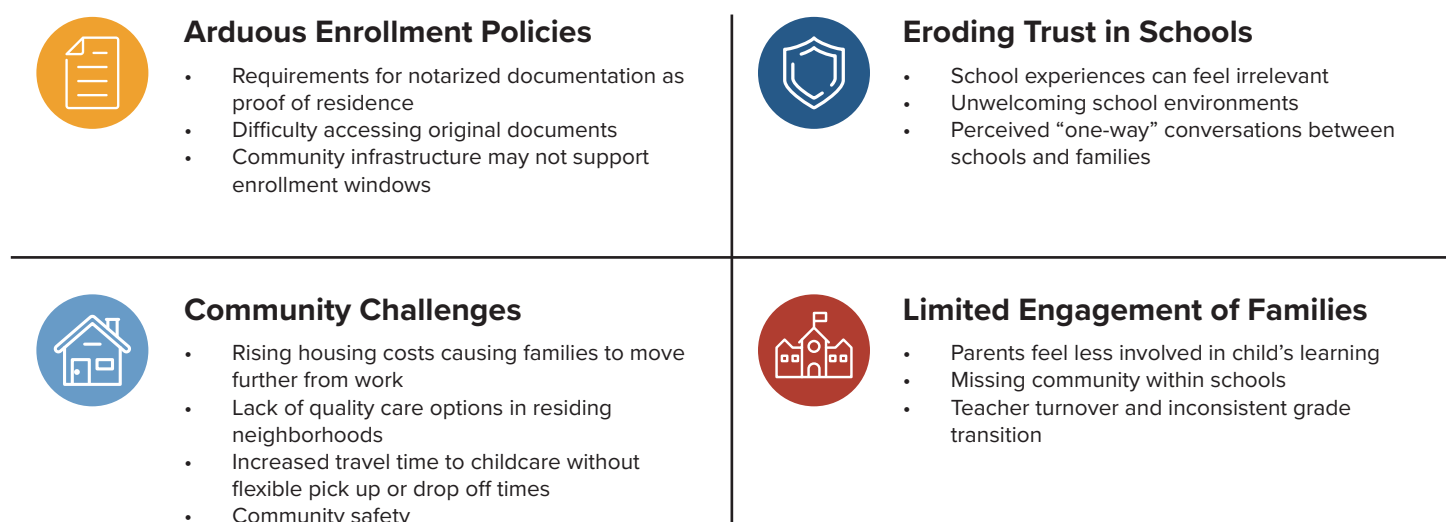
The main objective in conducting this case study was to examine the phenomenon of rising early grade disenrollment through the experiences and challenges faced by those most

proximate to the issue. By centering family voices, our case study sought to understand the complex interplay of multiple factors influencing child and family disengagement and disenrollment from public school.

Understanding the reasons behind this reality is essential, to mitigating opportunity and achievement gaps for children of color and children living in poverty through the early elementary grades and beyond.

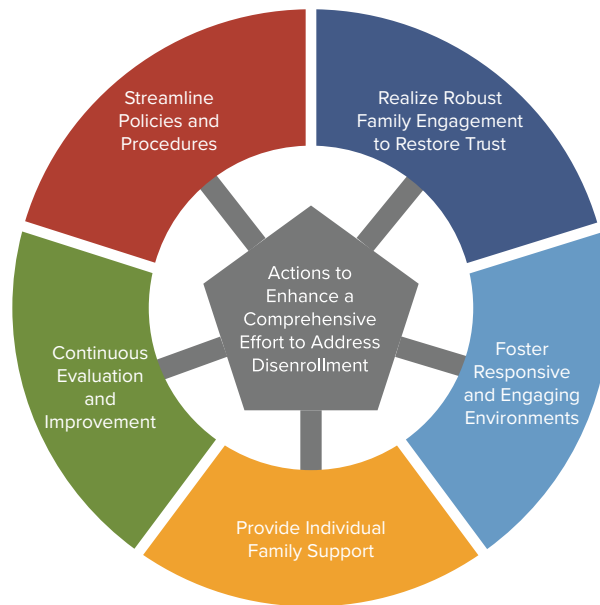
We explore the “why” behind the reality of early grade low enrollment/disenrollment in one large urban school district, Atlanta Public Schools, and offer policy and practice solutions for large, urban cities – and other jurisdictions – by targeting and aligning systems and communities to better support the needs of families with young children, particularly for families of color and those families living in poverty. We offer the following key findings related to the most critical barriers and drivers of disenrollment.

Figure 1



To address these issues, we have identified a set of recommendations, informed by interviews with families, educators, and administrators, which are explored more fully in the Recommendations section beginning on page 11.

Framework for a Comprehensive Strategy to Address Disenrollment



I. Methodology :

Our case study took place in four phases. The first phase was focused on completing an enrollment data analysis of the Atlanta Public School System. This allowed us to track continuing enrollment decline across the system post-COVID, particularly for schools serving low-income families and children of color. The second phase involved conducting a deep-dive literature and policy review to inform our thesis. Individual interviews comprised the third phase, including conversations with representatives of the Atlanta mayor's office, school leadership within Atlanta Public Schools, community not-for-profit organizations, and faculty from higher education institutions with expertise in Atlanta's housing and education policies. The fourth phase of our work was informed by the realities and perspectives of those closest to the issue. Hosting a series of focus groups in partnership with Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS), we heard directly from parents of young children representing low-income families of color as well as parent representatives from the [GEEARS Early Education Ambassadors](#) program. All focus group participants were living in an Atlanta Public School education cluster where elementary schools have experienced an overall enrollment decline since 2017. Through these conversations, we aimed to understand several issues, including:

- Current barriers to enrollment into early education programs within designated clusters
- Perspectives on family engagement, school climate, and other factors that may affect enrollment
- Suggestions for school, district, and city leaders to help re-engage families and children in the school system and reduce disenrollment.

PHASE 1: Data Analysis

(September 2023 – April 2024)

Review of Atlanta Public School (APS) enrollment data to understand on-going trends.

PHASE 2: Literature and Policy Review

(October 2023 – December 2023)

Deep-dive review of relevant literature and existing policy to inform thesis statement.

PHASE 3: Individual Interviews

(November 2023 – May 2024)

Interviews conducted with Mayor's Office, APS leadership, non-profits, and IHE faculty.

PHASE 4: Parent and Family Focus Groups

(May 2024 – June 2024)

Focus groups conducted to raise the voice of those most proximate to the disenrollment issue.

Summary of Research and Findings:

Our team consulted the national data and research on enrollment trends post-COVID as well as reports and data focused on Atlanta. The review was used to provide an initial context for our understanding as we set out to explore key challenges and actionable solutions. This process documented the reality that the COVID pandemic drastically impacted early education, initially wiping out a decade of progress in increasing Pre-K enrollment and leading to a historic decline in the enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds.

Nationwide, initial data following the pandemic was alarming. Data showed a decline in enrollment in state-funded preschool programs of nearly 20% (or by 300,000 children) in the year 2021 and a reduction in spending on early education in 26 states by \$234M compared to the previous year, leading to strained budgets, staffing shortages, and other impacts.¹ School systems worked to locate and re-engage these students. Thankfully, we have seen a strong rebound in pre-k enrollment, with enrollments increasing in the 2022-2023 school year.² Additionally, states have increased their levels of spending in pre-k, reaching an all-time high in 2023 of \$11.7 billion (inclusive of time-limited COVID relief funding provided by the federal government).³ Yet, the number of children participating in state-funded preschool remains lower than it was prior to the pandemic,⁴ mirroring trends observed nationally across the K-12 continuum.⁵

Georgia was not exempt from the national disenrollment trends, as the state experienced similar declines in its state-funded early education enrollment, with a decline from 60% of the

¹Friedman, Allison H., et al. "STATE PRESCHOOL YEARBOOK - The National Institute for Early Education Research." National Institute for Early Education Research, 2022, https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/YB2021_Full_Report.pdf. Accessed 9 July 2024.

²[2023_nieer_yearbook_8-9-24.pdf](#)

³Id.

⁴Id

⁵COE - Public School Enrollment." National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cga/public-school-enrollment>. Accessed 2 October 2024.

eligible state population enrolled in childcare in 2017 to only 49% enrolled in 2021.⁶ Enrollment has since rebounded to 56% of the population but has yet to return to the pre-pandemic figures.⁷ Within the district, elementary schools are, on average, at 62% utilization of the available space, falling from 70% during the 2019-2020 school year. Similarly, Head Start programs in the state face declining enrollment, with 2.7% of 4-year-olds enrolled in programs in 2023, compared to 3.2% in 2019.⁸

Schools that serve early grades continue to face declining enrollment, and subsequent funding shortfalls threaten to close centers in areas populated by families most impacted by economic hardship. Currently, 9 out of every 20 children ages 0-5 in Atlanta are from families that are economically disadvantaged, including 5 living in poverty. 45% of children in Atlanta under age 6 are living below 200% of the poverty rate in Atlanta. In 2021, GEEARS conducted focus groups of low-income Head Start families to understand the impact of the pandemic and found that topline concerns included food insecurity, employment, housing loss, and gaps in public benefits. In each case, the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic exacerbated the challenges that had existed previously for many families. The pandemic also heightened the importance of Head Start programs and schools in assisting with connections to services.⁹

Today, housing availability and affordability remain challenges for families in the Atlanta area, with inventory returning to pre-pandemic levels but increased pricing shutting out families and/or impacting the ability of households to meet other critical other needs, including education. Additional factors like transportation costs severely impact where families choose to live, and these costs combined with housing can compromise up to 60% of an average household's income.¹⁰

A closer look at early grade enrollment trends for the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) shows the scale of the issue in the district. Nationally, trends show a projected 1.6% decline in elementary school enrollment through 2024 with an expected 1.3% decline in enrollment for the State of Georgia¹¹. Yet APS enrollment in grades PreK through third grade has dropped 13% since 2019. This in comparison to an overall decrease of 5% across all APS grades for the same years¹². Representing nearly 3,000 fewer children on the early grade rolls in Atlanta, this documents a continuing trend of enrollment decline that first began in the 2020-2021 school year.

⁶ Friedman, Allison H., et al., "STATE PRESCHOOL YEARBOOK - The National Institute for Early Education Research." National Institute for Early Education Research, 2022, https://nieer.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/YB2021_Full_Report.pdf. Accessed 9 July 2024.

⁷ [2023_nieer_yearbook_8-9-24.pdf](#)

⁸ Community Data Explorer." Georgia's CACDS, <https://www.gacacds.com/data-explorer/>. Accessed 10 September 2024.

⁹ Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Head Start Programs and Families: Recommendations for Health Care Providers and Policymakers." Geeears.org, 2021, https://www.georgiavoices.org/_files/ugd/024d26_0d6cfb49f27048a38ba0a-f79a04fb0e2.pdf. Accessed 10 July 2024.

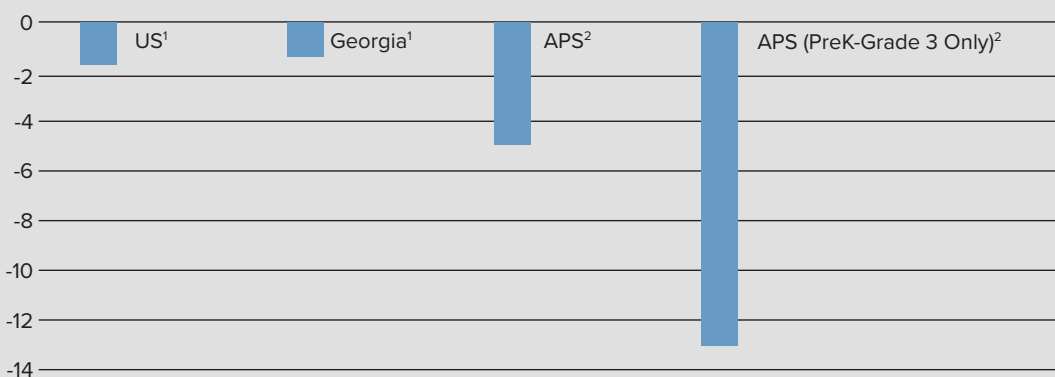
¹⁰ "ULI Housing Study Update." KB Advisory Group, 17 November 2023, <https://www.kbagroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Housing-at-its-Core-ULI-Study.pdf>. Accessed 10 July 2024.

¹¹ National Center for Education Statistics

¹² Georgia Insights/Georgia Department of Education

Spotlight on Enrollment Trends

Percentage Decline in Public School Enrollment 2019-2024



¹ National Center for Education Statistics

² Georgia Insights/Georgia Department of Education

Finally, we reviewed research to better understand the complex interplay of factors that lead to disenrollment. Citing family engagement and support as crucial to student success, Epstein and Sheldon document that when families are not involved or supported in their child's education, disengagement is more likely¹³. This includes issues such as lack of parental education, limited resources, or cultural barriers. Leading scholars have explored how poverty affects children's academic outcomes and engagement, highlighting the broader impacts of economic hardship on educational involvement, including school disengagement and disenrollment.¹⁴ And, studies on absenteeism show that chronic absenteeism in the early grades is a strong predictor of future disengagement. The work of Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes have documented the factors contributing to absenteeism including health issues, transportation problems, and negative school experiences.¹⁵

Finally, and most importantly, in order to best understand the causes and potential solutions for disenrollment in APS, we engaged directly through focus groups with families most impacted. Conducted over a series of visits, our team spent time with low-income families of

¹³ Epstein, J. L., & Sheldon, S. B. (2016). Necessary but Not Sufficient: The Role of Policy for Advancing Programs of School, Family, and Community Partnerships. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 2(5), 202. <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2016.2.5.10>

¹⁴ Duncan, G. J., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Klebanov, P. K. (1994). Economic Deprivation and Early Childhood Development. *Child Development*, 65(2), 296–318. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1994.tb00752.x>

¹⁵ Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). The Importance of Being There: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools. https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf

young children in Atlanta exploring their current realities and relationship with the schools to which they are connected. It was our intent to uncover the hopes and aspirations they hold for their children as well as their perspectives on school and the challenges they face in maintaining a strong connection to the educational opportunities available in their communities. In effect, our work is an attempt to elevate their individual family truths to inform a better path forward.

Our focus group conversations revealed multiple, knowable causes of early grade disenrollment, all exacerbated by the pandemic. We identify here six key themes distilled from our direct interviews; each theme was instructive to the development of actions to bolster early grade school participation and abate disenrollment and its resulting negative consequences for both schools and the families and children they serve.

Key Themes from Parent Focus Groups:

1. Complicated Enrollment Policies: APS enrollment requirements, such as required notarization of proof of residence documents and the requirement that families submit original copies of identifying documentation, pose challenges for families, especially those relocating frequently or from out-of-state without records in the local system. In many cases, families that may not readily possess and cannot produce the necessary documentation for enrollment, (e.g., immunization records) opt not to enroll their children for that academic year.

“The thirty-day window from the first day of school to provide proof of updated immunizations is challenging when the community health care center has appointments starting two months out.”

-Parent of incoming kindergarten child

2. Transportation to and from School: Limited transportation options, particularly for single-parent households, create difficulties for families, particularly those managing multiple child care responsibilities with different school start times and end times. These challenges were particularly difficult for parents **opting to enroll their children in schools outside of their neighborhood**, leading to additional commute times that can affect parents' ability to get to work on time. As a result, these decisions sometimes cause parents to prioritize the education of their older children who fall under Atlanta's attendance laws (mandatory school attendance is required at age six in the state of Georgia, making preschool and kindergarten voluntary). As low-income families are forced to move further away from the city and their jobs, they must routinely balance getting to work on time and ensuring their children catch the school bus or procure other transportation. Participants also raised safety concerns within their neighborhoods as a detriment to routine attendance by children – citing a lack of crossing guards or law enforcement to help ensure younger

children get to school and return home safely.

“Neighborhood safety is a concern. For children who live within a certain distance of school, transportation is not provided and their walk to and from school can be unsafe.”

- Principal of elementary school

3. Housing Instability/Displacement: Low-income families in Atlanta increasingly face housing instability, including rising costs and eviction risks, which disrupts children’s enrollment and attendance patterns. Coupled with a lack of affordable housing options, including affordable housing options, low-income families are challenged in maintaining a consistent residence within the city. Participants noted that when faced with financial difficulties and inconsistent housing, families may forgo center-based child care for children in favor of home-based or family-and-friend care. Lacking this connection to the system of early care and education in Atlanta communities, in turn, can be disruptive to effective transitions and the enrollment process when children reach school-age. Further, resources provided through the McKinney-Vento Act, which support homeless students and maintain school participation, can seem elusive to those for whom it was designed to serve. Family advocates noted that communication from APS to families on McKinney Vento funding availability must improve to help inform the most vulnerable populations and reduce the stigma in seeking assistance.

“I work directly with homeless families in our community and know for a fact that they have little knowledge about what their options are regarding school. It doesn’t seem to be communicated well.”

-Community support organization volunteer

4. Strained School and Family Relationships: Post-pandemic, distrust between families and schools has deepened, exacerbated by a perceived lack of compassion and inconsistent staff-family interactions. Participants highlighted previous work to foster deeper family-school engagement that stalled during COVID and has now been replaced by more pressing priorities for schools, like staffing challenges and learning loss. Some expressed concern regarding the quality of educational experiences following exposure to teaching methodologies and curricula employed during the pandemic. Overwhelmingly, participants felt that schools do not always treat families with the necessary respect or level of engagement. Many positive interactions relied heavily on individual teacher involvement and outreach, which may work in some cases but not systemically.

“It feels like a one-way conversation with no ability to provide input. They make recommendations but haven’t asked what’s going on at home.”

- Parent of child currently enrolled

5. Understanding and Enforcement of Attendance Policies: Our conversations revealed that families feel uncertain about attendance policies and absence procedures . Participants stressed the need for schools to reach out to parents in the ways that they most readily receive information, prioritizing social media but also using other methods, including phone, email, letter, and others, to make sure they are aware of policies, potential consequences, and other important notices regarding their child’s attendance. Additionally, they noted that some policies, such as home visits, are not consistently implemented or do not trigger until a certain number of consecutive days are missed, delaying more intense outreach from schools to families.

*“It seems like attendance matters up to the 20th day, then we don’t hear from them again.”
- Parent of child currently enrolled*

6. Student Mental and Physical Health: Post-pandemic, families experience increased mental and physical health challenges, compounded by financial hardships, impacting children’s school attendance and engagement. Noting the loss of family members, impacted employment opportunities, and rising housing costs, parents raised concerns regarding schools’ handling of children’s mental health challenges and the resulting impact on school participation, achievement, and classroom culture. They felt that schools expected a quick return to normalcy, overlooking existing traumas, learning loss, and social isolation experienced by children who required additional support to readjust to in-person learning. Miscommunication regarding a child’s behavior also strained relationships between parents and families.

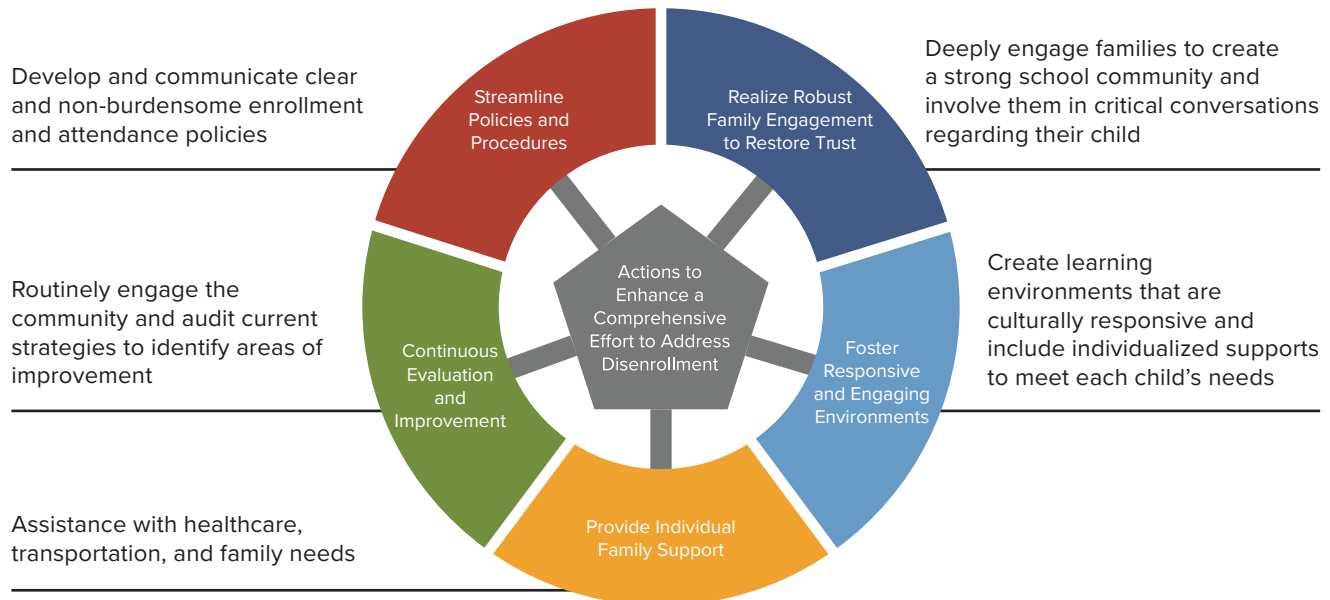
*“They don’t recognize the trauma we have been through. The pandemic was hard and it’s not like we can start up again like nothing ever happened.”
- Parent of enrolled children*

Recommendations :

Our review of relevant research coupled with powerful insights gathered from our parent focus groups and interviews with school leadership and community support organizations informed a set of actions designed to combat early grade disenrollment for Atlanta Public Schools. Acknowledging the continuously improving efforts led by APS leadership and staff to better serve its school community, we offer these recommendations to assist in meeting the needs of all families and children served in the early grades.

Noting that declining enrollment is a reality for numerous large, urban school districts across the nation, not just APS, we sought to summarize our recommendations within a comprehensive approach that could be applicable in APS and more broadly. Based on our findings, the five areas outlined below provide a framework for local leaders to create effective systems that could address disenrollment and support consistent, positive school participation on the part of young children and families.

Framework for a Comprehensive Strategy to Address Disenrollment



1. Streamline Enrollment Procedures and Attendance Policies

Enrollment can be a daunting process for anyone, particularly a young, single-parent family or extended family members (such as grandparents or great-grandparents) who are caring for a child in the absence of the parent. Understanding their challenges in navigating the multiple steps in the process can help district leaders better define procedures and policies that meet the needs of both families and the school system.

Consistently, we heard from families ways in which the enrollment process can be improved, including examining the unintended consequences of specific requirements that can have a negative impact on timely enrollment, such as, notarization of certain documents, access to necessary documents, and support navigating the on-line enrollment portal. Strengthening outreach and communication from the schools to specific attendance zones was suggested as well. We also note the difficulties that arise for school personnel when a majority of families in the district appear for enrollment on the first day of school without prior contact, overburdening staff and available resources. The following actions are offered for consideration:

- Review current enrollment policies and conduct regular parent focus groups to identify and eliminate unnecessary barriers to streamline and lessen the burden on families and school staff, particularly for school clusters consistently impacted by decreasing enrollment.
- Consider the current timing of the enrollment window to ensure adequate flexibility for families to meet necessary requirements (e.g., immunization, document submission, notarization).
- Create consistent communication plans across school clusters to routinely alert families about upcoming enrollment windows, their current eligibility, nearby schools, and the documentation needed to complete the process.
- Provide schools with funding to hire enrollment support staff during the enrollment window, which might include notaries, if necessary, to create a single point of assistance for families.
- Clearly outline and communicate attendance policies, including steps for outreach to families after tiered thresholds of absences are reached.
- Consolidate enrollment policies into a single, accessible location and distribute this information via mail, email, and social media platforms to ensure all families are reached.
- Consider adjusting the age of mandatory enrollment, i.e., mandatory school attendance shall begin at the time that a child is 5 years of age on/before September 1 of the school year, as opposed to current expectation where the kindergarten year is not mandatory.¹⁶

2. Realize Robust Family Engagement to Restore Trust

¹⁶ [20-2-690.1.pdf \(gadoe.org\)](#)

Following the pandemic, families expressed a need to feel better connected to the school in which their young children will be or are currently enrolled. Citing a sense of stronger school connection prior to COVID shutdowns and the resulting disruptions that occurred, families talked about a greater sense of isolation and weaker connection as schools have reopened and returned to in-person learning. This was described as a growing erosion of trust, where families feel less certain of the system's ability to meet children "where they are." Attention to relevant and meaningful opportunities for family engagement and parent/school partnerships is imperative to re-establish trust and ensure stronger and consistent school participation. Consider the following:

- Develop and or expand existing effective strategies for year-round family engagement, with a targeted focus on summer transitions leading up to the enrollment window.
- Establish a district-wide, standardized platform in each school to gather family feedback and requests for assistance.
- Launch a public service campaign addressing common questions and misconceptions about the value of consistent, in-person attendance, particularly focused on the early grades.
- Create meaningful opportunities for family connectedness , informed by the needs and wishes of families, within school settings, to build strong community relationships. One example highlighted by families would be effective two-way communication strategies where families are encouraged to share insights about their child's strengths, interests, and needs.
- Provide increased funding within schools to hire full-time staff dedicated to addressing the individual needs of families, including referral to any services necessary to ensure consistent attendance, lowering the burden on teachers.

3. Foster a Responsive and Engaging Learning Environment

The COVID pandemic cause significant disruption for children and families, particularly those living in poverty. One focus group participant described living through the pandemic as "enduring immense trauma not unlike the suffering that comes from a devastating natural disaster." . Some lost family members or employment and sources of income, as well as the social isolation that was a constant during COVID. In many cases, parents described the school environments as lacking responsiveness to the needs of their families and children, with the schools "picking up where they left off" with little recognition of the increased fragility of children returning to school or entering for the first time. In response, schools should work to understand the struggles families endure and demonstrate a commitment to remedy them to bolster school participation. This could include:

- Create a welcoming physical school environment and encourage families to visit frequently to build a connection with staff and showcase school offerings.
- Re-evaluate current curricula and pedagogy to ensure developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive classroom experiences and instruction grounded in the science of

learning and development.

- Identify model examples of existing grade transition processes and expand to schools facing high student turnover rates across grades.
- Implement flexible drop-off and pick-up times to accommodate families who live and work far from the school.
- Implement trauma-informed educational practices that prioritize strengthening relationships to buffer the effects of stress and trauma.
- Assign a cohort of students to a family liaison who proactively reaches out to families and provides personal communication when a student is absent or struggling.
- Create supports for school educators and support staff targeting their mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

4. Coordinate Comprehensive Services

Families expressed difficulty in accessing family services from governmental agencies that often seem to operate in isolation. Navigating enrollment processes across schools and multiple support programs can seem inefficient and unnecessarily burdensome for families with limited resources. There was widespread agreement among focus group members that too often, “we provide the same documentation to different programs to get services. There’s got to be a way where we can give that information one time, at one place.” Providing assistance that can connect families to services designed to meet their needs can help alleviate pressures that stand in the way of enrollment and consistent school attendance.

- Establish city-wide “comprehensive enrollment hubs” where families can efficiently enroll in multiple government services, e.g., public school, SNAP, etc., in one single visit.
- Use a family’s enrollment in other public benefits program, or documents or verification used for other benefit programs, to verify eligibility for school enrollment, where appropriate.
- Establish a hotline for families to receive assistance with school enrollment and attendance barriers, including healthcare, transportation, and other needs.
- Assign dedicated staff to each school to connect families with appropriate government agencies for additional support, ensuring their child’s regular attendance and overall well-being.
- Expand transportation options for early-grades students to ensure safe passage to and from school.

5. Continuous Evaluation and Improvement

Central to any comprehensive strategy designed to address a specific issue is the need to develop processes and procedures to facilitate on-going improvement. Needs of families and their young children are not static but change in relation to their life circumstances. The world-wide pandemic and all of its implications are ample evidence of this. For schools to bolster early grade enrollment and maintain an engaged student population, it will be neces-

sary to routinely engage the community and assess strategies for effectiveness and improvement.

- Establish a system for regularly monitoring enrollment data and evaluating the effectiveness of implemented strategies. This includes tracking enrollment numbers, analyzing feedback, and assessing the impact of new programs.
- Identify data that currently exists both within and outside of the education agency that can be used to inform impact and identify persistent needs, as well as new data sources that can inform continuous improvement
- Create mechanisms for ongoing feedback from students, parents, and staff to continuously refine and improve strategies.
- Embed successful strategies and improvements in standard practices and policies.
- Develop a long-term plan to sustain enrollment improvements and adapt to future changes in the community or educational landscape.

One final consideration is related to greater government coordination and the positive impact of collective action that can result when agencies come together and align around solutions to a defined problem. Many of the policy solutions being offered are not the sole responsibility of the public school system but can be solved through effective cross-agency and community collaboration. Exploring and operationalizing an interagency body equipped with staff and necessary resources can be effective in addressing large, systemic issues plaguing the larger community.

The establishment of an interagency Task force to address declining enrollment and chronic absenteeism featuring relevant agencies in education, public health, law enforcement, family services, and child welfare can be powerful in reversing the current trend, one that is detrimental to the future success of Atlanta's most vulnerable population – its children and families living on the margins.

Conclusion :

The 2020-2021 school year saw the largest decline in public school enrollment since the start of the century. Nationally, post COVID, public school enrollment numbers have yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels. This is particularly true of the early grades, prek-third grade. The related implications can be profound for both the schools and families, including loss of school funding, staff positions, relocation of programs, and lessened capacity for childrens' school success.

Understanding the reasons behind this trend have implications for actionable policy solutions. EducationCounsel spent time on the ground in one large urban city, Atlanta, to explore the challenges and barriers faced particularly by low-income families of color and their children in engaging and navigating the public-school enrollment process, maintaining consistent attendance and participation, and their overall perceptions connectedness to their district schools.

The findings from our research and focus groups demonstrated numerous factors impacting a family's decision to enroll their child in an early education program and maintain consistent attendance across the early grades. Material factors like housing, financial challenges, and transportation options weighed heavily to families as well as their child's school's environment and relationship with school staff and administrators.

School and system leaders must adapt their practices and learning environments to meet the individual needs of the children and families they serve, fostering community within their buildings and creating support networks that uplift each member. Restoring the trust of families following the pandemic will not be easy, but there is opportunity to re-establish the value of engaging in school at the very earliest stage and highlight the critical development and support it provides for the beginning of a child's learning and development journey.

City leaders must recognize the urgency of the challenge and coordinate closely to craft effective solutions to provide the conditions that allow children and their families to succeed without having to make difficult decisions between housing, employment, and educational opportunities while they reside in the city. They must also ease the burden of entry into education and create thriving communities with various options that meet the full needs of their residents and support the whole child.

In sum, solving the post-pandemic disenrollment dilemma for the early grades involves a mix of outreach, engagement, and support to attract and maintain active school participation, particularly among those families and furthest from opportunity. Implementation of policy solutions that are responsive to their needs will inevitably lead to a more equitable, effective system of education.